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YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPLANATIONS OF UNEMPLOYMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates a neglected aspect of the transition from school to work in the 1980s, namely how young people perceive and explain unemployment. Examining sample survey data on high school (n = 983) and university (n = 589) graduates in a western Canadian city, we find widespread concern about unemployment. While there is evidence that youth place blame for unemployment on both the economic system and the jobless themselves, the most pervasive explanation given by respondents of why youth unemployment is high in Canada is that young people lack work experience. Socio-demographic characteristics appear to be only weakly correlated with different types of unemployment explanations and are therefore of little help in accounting for variations in such beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

High unemployment has become a structural feature of many advanced capitalist societies. This poses acute problems for young people attempting to establish themselves in an occupation after completing their education. Facing ever-greater hurdles in the transition from school to work, growing numbers of youth inhabit an economic wasteland characterized by unemployment, government training schemes, prolonged dependency on their families and a generally diminished quality of life. Traditional entry level jobs, especially for high school leavers, have been disappearing. And because the labour market is segmented into 'youth jobs' and 'adult jobs', young people who succeed in finding work often become trapped in job ghettos where they are vulnerable to underemployment and unemployment (see Breen, 1983; Ashton, Maguire and Garland, 1982; Ashton and Maguire, 1986; Main and Raffe, 1983; Mackay, 1985; Roberts, Duggan and Noble, 1982; Osterman, 1980).

Yet despite increasing difficulties in the transition from school to work, there has been surprisingly little research on how young people actually view the unemployment problem (Furnham and Lewis, 1986:141-4). Surely an economic climate marked by uncertainty, increased competition for jobs and a relatively higher probability of being unemployed after graduating will have an impact on young people's perceptions of this issue. Central to how youth are adapting to today's tight job market is how they explain the causes of unemployment. This paper presents an exploratory analysis of how Canadian high school and university students surveyed prior to graduating explain the plight of their jobless peers. Social psychological studies of attributions about unemployment have not comprehensively examined the effects of differences in class background, pre-graduation work experiences and educational attainment. By the same token, sociological research on youth labour markets and the school - work transition has neglected young people's perceptions of the unemployment problem. We begin with the premise that these two lines of inquiry can be fruitfully integrated by locating students' explanations of unemployment within the larger context of their labour market experiences prior to graduation, educational attainment and class background - - in short, the key factors shaping their life chances.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPLANATIONS OF UNEMPLOYMENT

Research on young people's explanations of unemployment has mainly focused on poorly qualified recent high school leavers who are unemployed. These studies have been guided by the social psychological theory of attribution, which proposes that people will blame their failures on 'external' factors and their successes on 'internal' factors. Hence, it is hypothesized that unemployed youth will tend to explain unemployment by reference to the economy or the government, while those with jobs may favour more individualistic explanations that place responsibility for unemployment on the jobless themselves.

For example, Gurney (1981) found that a sample of Australian high school students held external explanations prior to graduation. Four months later, however, the unemployed school leavers still blamed social and economic factors for unemployment, whereas their class mates who had found work had adopted more individualistic causal beliefs. Other evidence suggests that the psychological impact of joblessness may be related to explanations of unemployment. Feather and Davenport (1981), for instance, discovered that depression among unemployed Australian youth was associated with higher levels of motivation to find a job and a tendency to blame unemployment on external factors. Approaching the issue from a different angle, a longitudinal study assessing the impact of post-graduation labour market experiences on explanations of unemployment identified four distinct types of beliefs: economic recession, lack of motivation, competence deficiency, and poor interview skills and appearance (Feather and O'Brien, 1985). These belief categories are similar in content to those in other studies (Feather, 1983; Feather and Davenport, 1981). Unemployed respondents, and females generally, had a greater propensity to blame youth unemployment on the economic recession. These longitudinal data reveal few attributional differences when respondents were still in school, but those who subsequently found a job tended to downplay the causal importance of the recession. The other types of explanations, however, showed no employment status or time effects.

One study specifically examining students' perceptions of the unemployment problem found that 9th and 10th year Australian students (average age of 14) were more internal in their explanations of unemployment than a previous sample of older youth in the labour market (Feather, 1983; cf. Feather and Davenport, 1981). Feather argues that, as 'observers' of the job market, these adolescents were more likely to blame the unemployed rather than economic

conditions. However, state school students, who came from somewhat lower socio-economic backgrounds than students in independent schools, were more likely to see the recession and job seekers' poor interview skills as responsible for unemployment.

Given the scale of youth unemployment in Britain, we might expect that many school leavers there, anticipating being unemployed, would be less likely to blame themselves or feel stigmatized when unable to find work (Hendry, Raymond and Stewart, 1984). Indeed, the lack of job opportunities for youth has prompted concerns about potential politicial unrest, but this 'moral panic' (Mungham, 1982) finds little empirical support. For instance, Breakwell (1985) detected widespread disaffection from mainstream politics among a random sample of 72 unemployed young people, although many gave verbal support to violent means of achieving social change. Breakwell's respondents also tended to account for the unemployment of others in individualistic terms. Looking at a non-random sample of recent school leavers in London, Furnham (1984) observed a general tendency to attribute getting a job to individual characteristics, while failure to find work was blamed on structural conditions. Working class youth vulnerable to unemployment were external in their attributions, as were females in comparison to males. However, Gaskell and Smith's (1985) study of a random sample of London male school leavers, both employed and unemployed, challenges the attributional explanation of unemployment beliefs. Regardless of their employment status, respondents viewed external causes as more important than internal ones. Only when it came to political and governmental causes did the unemployed express significantly different views, being more supportive. Gaskell and Smith could account for only 5% of the variance in internal attributions, and 13% in external ones, using employment status, political orientation, feelings of subjective deprivation and locus of control as predictors in regression analysis. Studies of attributional styles among adults have been equally unsuccessful in identifying the socio-demographic correlates of different types of explanations (see Furnham, 1982; Schlozman and Verba, 1979; Kluegal and Smith, 1981; Lowe et al., 1986).

North American data on how young people explain the causes of unemployment are virtually non-existant. One exception is Bowman's (1984) study of job search discouragement among black American youth. Fully 60% of the discouraged job seekers in Bowman's sample viewed labour market restrictions as the main cause of their joblessness, rather than internalizing blame.

In addition to providing a useful point of comparison for existing Australian and British studies, there are two major reasons why studying attributions among North American youth would add to our understanding of youth unemployment. First, in contrast to their counterparts in many other countries, especially Britain, it is very common for students in Canada and the United States to have extensive pre-graduation work experience (Ashton, 1986: 106; Michael and Tuma, 1984). Indeed, D'Amico (1984) notes that in the Unites States the fact that large proportions of young people hold jobs while in school has been lauded in some quarters because the work experience gained prepares students for the post-high school labour market. The counter-argument that working while in school can have negative effects on school performance which, in turn, may limit subsequent labour market opportunities has recently been proposed by Greenberger and Steinberg (1986). Thus, pre-graduation employment may have a bearing not only on future occupational patterns (Meyer and Wie, 1982), but also in shaping perceptions of the unemployment problem. Second, the escalation of educational credentials and job requirements has made growing proportions of high school and college graduates overqualified and underemployed (see Collins, 1979). Debates in the 1970s focused on the implications of these changes on educated young people's growing sense of entitlement to decent employment (see Derber, 1978). But little is known about how educated youth are reacting to the unemployment crisis of the 1980s.

This paper attempts a preliminary analysis of these issues. Our samples of high school and university graduates in a western Canadian city offer a unique opportunity to investigate the following research questions: 1) To what extent do male and female students about to graduate from high school and university perceive unemployment to be a problem? 2) What types of explanations are favoured by young people at these two key junctures in the transition from school to work? 3) How does a student's gender, class background, experiences of employment and unemployment and level of educational attainment influence how he or she explains unemployment?

DATA AND METHODS

Unemployment in Canada reached crisis proportions during the recession of the early 1980s and, despite signs of recovery, averaged 10.5% during 1985. Canada thus falls mid-way between the United States, where unemployment is below 7%, and Great Britain where it

exceeds 13% (Economist, 1 February 1986: 109). Nonetheless, Canadian youth are disproportionately represented in jobless figures: the 1985 official rate was 18.5% for 15 to 19 year olds and 15.3% for 20 to 24 year olds. (Monthly Labour Force Survey, December 1985: 122).

Against this backdrop of high youth unemployment, we launched a 24-month panel study of the transition from school to work among high school and university graduates in three Canadian cities (Edmonton, Toronto and Sudbury). In this paper we restrict ourselves to base-line data from one of the cities. We surveyed high school and university students in the spring of 1985 as they were about to graduate. Because of the difficulties in contacting a random sample of high school graduates, we utilized a non-probability sampling design, with the school as the primary sampling unit. Six schools in the city of Edmonton, Alberta, were selected on the basis of the mix of programs and diversity of student social class backgrounds. Questionnaires were administered by the researchers during class time. The total sample size is 983, based on students in 66 different classes in the six schools. A similar questionnaire was also mailed to a systematic (one in three) sample of spring 1985 graduates from the five largest faculties (arts, science, business, engineering, education) at the University of Alberta. The response rate was 64%, which is respectable for mail surveys of this type, yielding a sample size of 628. Given our present interest in young people, those born before 1955 have been excluded from the analysis, leaving a final sample of 589 university graduates.

Edmonton is a western Canadian provincial capital with a population of around 600,000. A booming oil and gas industry during the 1970s brought spectacular growth and prosperity to the city; the recession and plummeting oil prices in the 1980s turned this boom to bust. Unemployment in Edmonton leaped from 3.7% -- a situation of labour shortages -- in 1979 to over 15% by early 1984. At the time of the study, the unemployment rate was over 14%, well above the national average. It is within this economic environment that our respondents formulated their beliefs about the unemployment problem.

CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

A useful starting point for our analysis is an overview of the respondents' basic personal characteristics, social class background, and labour market experiences and plans. As expected, the university students are older than those in high school, with average ages of just

over 23 and 18 respectively. Both samples are fairly evenly split between males and females. In terms of socio-economic status, the university students come from more privileged backgrounds: over half of the university respondents have fathers in managerial or professional jobs, compared to 38% of the high school respondents. Going to university remains a largely middle (and upper) class phenomenon in Canada. Consequently, 57% of university students, compared to 39% of those in high school, report that their family s financial situation is above average or wealthy. Consistent with this greater family affluence, the university sample has a lower proportion of mothers in the employed labour force. However, within both samples, unemployment among fathers was below the Edmonton average in the year prior to the survey. Nonetheless, roughly 40% of all respondents reported that other family members had been unemployed during this period.

At the time of the survey, over 46% of all respondents were gainfully employed. Indeed, over half of the university students and more than 70% of those in high school had held a paying job at some point during the term. This employment pattern is somewhat more pronounced among females in both samples, although males tend to work longer hours. Most had financial motives for taking a job. This underlines the importance of a discretionary income in North American youth culture, especially among high school students. University students are likely to be funding their own education, which explains why most (80%) of them held a summer job. It is reasonable to expect these 'working students' to have encountered difficulties in the labour market. To be sure, over half of the high school respondents reported that there was a time when they wanted a job but could not find one. And almost 40% of the university graduates had actually been unemployed for a month or more.

The majority of Canadian high school graduates enter some form of post-secondary education. This trend was very pronounced in our high school sample, most likely because of bleak job prospects. Indeed, only 20% of our high school respondents planned to enter the labour market following graduation. In contrast, the majority of university graduates intended to seek permanent employment immediately after graduating. However, it is interesting that between 30% and 40% of university graduates planned to obtain post-graduate education or continue their education in some other area. To what degree this is a reaction to the lack of employment opportunities requires further investigation.

How concerned are the adolescents and young adults in our study about unemployment? We asked respondents how serious a problem they viewed unemployment to be. Over 90% of high school graduates and 87% of university graduates considered it to be a "serious" or "very serious" problem. These responses clearly attest to the near unanimity on the issue.

EXPLANATIONS OF WHY YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IS HIGH IN CANADA

Given that high school and university graduates view unemployment as a serious problem, how do they explain it? To answer this question, we presented respondents with a list of 16 opinions (17 in the university sample) about "why youth unemployment is high in Canada today", asking them to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement on a 5-point scale. Half of the 16 items are original, the remainder being adapted from previous studies by Gurney (1981) and Feather (1983). We performed exploratory factor analyses with both samples (results not reported but available from the authors upon request) to help identify different belief clusters, and found sufficient similarities to allow us to create six indices, representing different types of beliefs, out of 14 of the items. These are presented in Table 1.

A four-item "work values" explanation of unemployment, blaming jobless youth for being work-shy, was the dominant factor in the combined samples (alpha of .67). The remaining five indices should be treated more cautiously. Each is comprised of two items which are weakly or, at best, moderately correlated. Perhaps the most reliable index among these is what we have labelled "business/government job creation", which explains unemployment as a result of businesses or governments failing to create enough jobs. The remaining indices blame unemployment on the educational system for not providing job relevant knowledge and skills or adequate career advice; on poor luck or the lack of contacts who can "pull a few strings"; on immigrants or married women taking jobs that could otherwise go to young people; and on the lack of work experience among youth and their poor self-presentation at job interviews.

The most pervasive explanation, endorsed by over 75% of all respondents, is that young people lack the work experience wanted by employers. Yet there is also fairly widespread support for both structural and individualistic types of explanations. This may indicate the general ambivalence of public opinion towards the unemployed, viewing some as deserving and others as lazy (Kelvin and Jarrett, 1985:93). For instance, approximately half of our respondents (especially those in high school) believe that youth unemployment is caused by lack

TABLE 1
Explanations of Why Youth Unemployment is High in Canada
by Educational Attainment and Sex

% Who agree with each of the following opinions about "why youth unemployment is high in Canada":[1]	High School male (n=514) %		High School female (n=469) %		University male (n=300) %		University female (n=289) %
1) Work Values:							
Young people are too choosy about jobs they will take.	52		50	•	46		39
Lack of effort by the unemployed to find a job.	48		46	•	33		35
It is too easy to get welfare and unemployment insurance.	44		44		43		40
Many young people are not that concerned about finding a job right now.	28		30	•	25	†	13
			(alpha = .67)				
2) Business/Government Job Creation:							
Canadian businesses have not provided enough jobs.	56		50		51		48
Government has failed to create enough jobs.	53		52	•	39	†	46
			(r = .54)				
3) Educational System:							
Schools and universities do not provide the knowledge and skills that employers want.	39		39	•	29		36
Inadequate advice by instructors and career counsellors.	27		30	•	38		41
			(r = .33)				
4) Luck/Contacts:							
Getting a job depends on luck.	29		26		27		25
The only young people who find jobs are those who know someone who is able to pull a few strings.	42		36		37		44
			(r = .45)				
5) Immigrants and Women Taking Jobs:							
Too many immigrants have been getting jobs in Canada.	39		36	•	16		17
Too many married women are working.	16	†	9	•	8		7
			(r = .29)				
6) Inexperience/Interview Skills:							
Young people lack the work experience that employers want.	75		77		79		82
Young people do not know how to present themselves favourably in interviews.	43		38		48		45
			(r = .24)				

[1] The Table reports the proportion of respondents answering "agree" or "strongly agree" on a 5-point scale, where 1 = "strongly disagree" and 5 = "strongly agree". The n for each item varies slightly because of non-response.

• Differences between total high school and total university samples significant at $p < .01$.

† Sex differences within each sample significant at $p < .01$.

of job creation efforts by business and government. However, between 40% and 50% of respondents also blame unemployed youth for being too choosy about the jobs they will take or the ease with which they can obtain welfare and unemployment insurance.

Table 1 also indicates whether or not there are significant differences in the opinions held, first between high school and university graduates, and second, between males and females within each of the two samples. University and high school grads have significantly different levels of agreement with 8 of the 14 explanations. Specifically, university sample members are more likely to attribute high youth unemployment to inadequate advice by instructors and guidance career counsellors. However, with this one exception noted, the university grads are less likely than their high school counterparts to blame unemployment on the work values of the jobless, government or business, the educational system, or immigrants and women. Overall, males and females share similar views about the causes of unemployment. The three items showing significant sex differences also reveal a divergence of opinion according to educational attainment. Specifically, high school males are more in agreement with the semtiment that too many married women are working. And within the university sample only, males are more likely than females to agree that many young people are not concerned about finding a job, but less likely to agree that the government has failed to create enough jobs.

CORRELATES OF UNEMPLOYMENT EXPLANATIONS

Our next step is to identify the correlates of the six types of causal explanations of youth unemployment. This will help to illuminate to what extent a respondent s educational attainment, sex, class background, family's experience of unemployment, pre-graduation labour market experiences, educational plans and school performance are associated with each of the causal attributions (see Table 2 for how each independent variable is coded). Previous studies of young peoples' explanations of unemployment have tended to ignore many of these important sociological variables (Furnham, 1985:122).

None of the zero-order correlations in Table 2 are very strong. By examining those which have significant, albeit weak, effects it is nevertheless possible to get a sense of the social distribution of different explanations. Turning first to gender, the only significant difference is for the immigrants/women taking jobs index, which males are more likely to endorse.

TABLE 2

Zero-Order Correlations of Independent Variables with Explanations of Unemployment Indices

	Work Values	Business/ Government Job Creation	Educational System	Luck/ Contacts	Immigrants/ Women Taking Jobs	Work Inexperience/ Interview Skills
Sex (Female=1)	-.02	.04	.05	-.02	-.10*	-.02
Father's Occupation (Managerial/ Professional=1)	.04	-.11*	.02	-.02	-.12*	.01
Father's Education (1-4; 4=high)	-.01	-.08*	.01	-.02	-.15*	.01
Family Finances (1-5; 5=wealthy)	.13*	-.13*	-.01	-.06*	-.09*	-.02
Fathers' Employment Status (Full or Part-time=1)	.08*	-.07*	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.02
Months Father Unemployed Last Year	-.07*	.05	.02	.05	.04	-.03
Other Family Members Unemployed Last Year (Yes=1)	-.04	.05	.04	.01	.07*	.05
Held Job While In School (Yes=1)	.13*	-.01	.01	-.02	.10*	-.02
Hours Worked Per Week While In School	.13*	-.02	-.01	-.08	.09*	.01
Had a Job Last Summer (FT=3; PT=2; no job=1)	.04	-.09*	.02	-.04	-.05	.03
Ever Couldn't Find a Job or Unemployed (Yes=1)	-.16*	.16*	.09*	.16*	.10*	.02
Education Level (University=1)	-.13*	-.11*	.04	.03	-.26*	.06*
Returning to School Next Fall (Yes=1)	.05	.08*	-.04	-.02	.05	-.10
Grades Past Year	-.03	-.06*	-.05	-.04	-.10*	.01

* $p < .01$ (n's of approximately 1550, except for correlations with family finances, when n's are about 1390.

The second set of independent variables tap family socio-economic status and unemployment experiences. Overall, there is weak evidence of what may be termed a class effect. Respondents from more affluent families, where the father is a well educated manager or professional, are less prone to attribute causation to business or government. In one respect, youth from middle and upper middle class backgrounds (measured by father's occupation and education as well as family finances) are more liberal, at least to the extent that they are less likely to blame high youth unemployment on immigrants and women taking jobs. Coming from a more affluent family per se makes one significantly more supportive of the work values explanation and less supportive of the luck / contacts explanation. Respondents with unemployed fathers show a tendency to blame government and business, and not the work values of the unemployed, However, the beliefs of those reporting unemployment among other family members can be distinguished from other respondents only with respect to their stronger conviction that immigrants or women take jobs from youth.

Having been employed while in school, and working longer hours, are both positively correlated with the work values and the immigrants or women taking jobs explanations. Among those respondents who held a summer job, there is significantly less agreement with the business / government job creation explanation. In other words, work experience does not create greater tolerance among high school and university graduates towards the unemployed or a better understanding of how the labour market operates. Rather, it seems to foster individualism and a sense of competition, leading to explanations based on the moral laxity of their jobless peers and the 'crowding out' effects on youth of two main sources of low wage labour, immigrants and women. In contrast, however, respondents who had been unemployed are not as likely to agree with the work values explanation and tend to favour explanations that blame business and government, the failure of the educational system, luck or contacts, and competition from women or immigrants. Considering these issues more generally, we should not dismiss the possibility that differences in work attitudes among students may influence their degree of involvement in the labour market and, in turn, shape perceptions of unemployment.

Looking finally at educational variables, we note that, in contrast to high school graduates, university graduates are significantly less likely to endorse explanations based on the poor work values of jobless youth, lack of government or business job creation, inadequate work experience or interview skills among youth and, especially, jobs being taken by immigrants

or women. Consistent with this, we note a positive correlation between planning to return to school and blaming the lack of business or government job creation for unemployment. School performance has a weak effect on two of the explanations. Respondents with lower grades tend to blame lack of business and government job creation, as well as immigrants or women for taking jobs.

In sum, we are left with a rather sketchy picture of the correlates of the six explanations of unemployment. Only the work values, business and government job creation, and immigrants or women taking jobs indices show any systematic relationship with the characteristics of respondents. In terms of the independent variables, we found a gender effect and some evidence of attributional differences based on class, educational attainment and school performance. There are also some indications that labour market experiences shape explanations. Weak but significant differences between those who had and those who had not personally experienced unemployment were observed for five of the six explanation indices. But these results are far from conclusive. It seems that different types of causal explanations are only tenuously associated with distinct sub-groups within the youth population. Nor do unemployment explanations neatly fit one ideological outlook. If anything, our findings suggest that young people's views about the causes of unemployment are varied and complex, and probably influenced by a wider range of factors than we have been able to measure.

ACCOUNTING FOR VARIATIONS IN UNEMPLOYMENT EXPLANATIONS

As a final step in our analysis, we use multiple regression to determine the net effects of these independent variables on variations in explanations of unemployment within the combined high school and university samples. Reduced-form multiple regression equations containing only those variables significant at the .05 level, the results of a series of step-wise multiple regression analyses, are displayed in Table 3. Because of the central role which educational level appears to play in these analyses, this variable has been reported in the trimmed equations even in the one case (business/government job creation) where it does not have a significant effect.

The most salient general finding in Table 3 is that, despite our inclusion of a fairly comprehensive set of socio-demographic, educational and employment-related measures, at best we can account for no more tha 11% of the variance in explanations of unemployment. For

TABLE 3

Explanations of Unemployment and Their Correlates:
Multiple Regression Equations* for Six Explanation Indices

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	b	St. Error	Beta	Sig.	R^2
1) Work Values	Grades past year	-.065	.030	-.056	.034	
	Employed last summer	.058	.027	.060	.031	
	Employed during school term	.138	.045	.082	.002	
	Ever unemployed	-.220	.043	-.137	.000	
	Number of months father unemployed	-.021	.009	-.065	.016	
	Father's education	-.038	.018	-.057	.039	
	Parents' financial situation	.142	.031	.132	.000	
	Education level	-.309	.047	-.189	.000	
(n=1376)	(Constant)	2.896				.084
2) Business/government job creation	Grades past year	-.089	.034	-.066	.010	
	Return to school in fall	.139	.055	.073	.011	
	Sex	.107	.047	.057	.023	
	Ever unemployed	.236	.048	.126	.000	
	Father's job	-.112	.050	-.060	.025	
	Parents' financial situation	-.109	.034	-.087	.001	
	Education level	-.081	.056	-.042	.150	
(n=1527)	(Constant)	3.835				.056
3) Educational system	Sex	.092	.047	.050	.050	
	Ever unemployed	.189	.047	.102	.000	
	Education level	.107	.049	.056	.029	
(n=1547)	(Constant)	2.818				.014
4) Luck/contacts	Hours per week usually worked	-.006	.002	-.076	.003	
	Ever unemployed	.325	.051	.162	.000	
	Education level	.103	.053	.049	.052	
(n=1553)	(Constant)	2.743				.033
5) Immigrants/women taking jobs	Grades past year	-.141	.036	-.102	.000	
	Sex	-.167	.079	-.087	.001	
	Other family member unemployed	.101	.050	.051	.044	
	Fathers' education	-.099	.020	-.125	.000	
	Education level	-.512	.050	-.263	.000	
(n=1381)	(Constant)	3.261				.113
6) Work experience/ interview skills	Other family members unemployed	.090	.042	.054	.033	
	Education level	.105	.043	.062	.015	
(n=1556)	(Constant)	3.534				.006

* Trimmed multiple regression equations; only variables with statistically significant effects ($p \leq .05$) are retained. See Table 2 for a complete list of all variables examined in each of the above equations.

three of the indices (educational system, luck / contacts, immigrants or women taking jobs) 97% or more of the variance remains unexplained. There appear to be few identifiable differences in attributional patterns across sub-groups within this sample of young people, at least in terms of the independent variables we examined.

The "immigrants / women taking jobs" equation showed the highest amount of explained variance (11%). Female respondents, along with those reporting unemployment among family members, are less likely to agree. But is it education -- measured in terms of grades, as well as respondent's and father's attainment levels -- which seems to produce more liberal attitudes in this respect.

The research literature and our factor analysis results identify the individualistic (work values) and structural (business / government job creation) indices as most central. Despite the low amounts of explained variance in these equations, there are some interesting findings. As noted in our discussion of Table 2, education generally and experience of unemployment, both direct and indirect, are associated with less support for the work values explanation. Conversely, prior work experiences and an affluent family background engender significantly more support for this individualistic explanation. Personal unemployment experience, socio-economic background and education also have a bearing on the structural explanation. Respondents from higher socio-economic status families, those with a university degree and who achieved higher grades are less likely to blame business or government for youth unemployment. In contrast, personal experience of unemployment tends to foster this view. So too does planning to return to school, suggesting that a perceived scarcity of jobs may figure in this decision.

Finally, even after controlling for the effects of other indenpendent variables, females are more prone to believe that youth unemployment is due to lack of job creation efforts by business or government or deficiencies in the educational system. Males are more likely to blame immigrants or married women for taking jobs that otherwise might go to young people.

DISCUSSION

This paper has investigated how young people's explanations of unemployment are shaped by class, labour market and educational factors. Our results should be viewed as preliminary. Answers to many of the questions arising out of this paper, especially concerning

dynamics of the transition from school into the labour market, must await completion of our longitudinal study.

To summarize the main findings, let us return to the three questions that guided our analysis. First, regarding young people's concerns about unemployment, there is no doubt that the high school and university students we surveyed view it as a serious problem. The overriding consensus on this issue undoubtedly reflects the general economic climate in the city of Edmonton, especially the sharp jump in unemployment since the early 1980s.

The second question focused on the types of explanations favoured by students about to complete either high school or university. The explanation favoured by a large majority was that youth lack the work experience sought by employers. Since most respondents already have considerable work experience through part-time and summer jobs, this finding is something of a paradox. It may be the case that experience in student jobs is not considered relevant by the gatekeepers of the full-time jobs to which these youth aspire. Alternatively, our respondents may have heard this argument so often that they have come to accept it as conventional wisdom.

More generally, we found a mixture of beliefs, with a slightly greater tendency to blame unemployment on the lack of job creation efforts by business and government. This propensity to blame the system is consistent with at least one other study of students prior to their graduation (Gurney, 1981). But there was also a sizeable proportion who directly placed blame on the shoulders of jobless youth.

The complex nature of public beliefs about issues such as unemployment is evident in our identification of six distinct types of explanations. Previous research using typologies based on three belief categories -- structural, individualistic and fatalistic -- thus seem to oversimplify matters (see especially Furnham, 1982). Of the six indices, the one emphasizing work values is identified most consistently in this and in other studies of adults in the city of Edmonton (Lowe et al., 1986), British adults (Furnham, 1982) and Australian young people (Feather, 1983; Feather and O'Brien, 1985; Feather and Davenport, 1981). Blaming the personal weaknesses of the victims of unemployment mirrors, we would argue, the deep-seated capitalist ideology of individualism. Precisely how the dominant ideology filters individuals' perceptions of the unemployment problem deserves more careful probing.

We can offer only qualified answers to the third question regarding the effects of key respondent characteristics on the types of explanations endorsed. Gender, class background, direct and indirect encounters with unemployment, work experience and education are all weakly correlated with various explanations of unemployment. As in other multi-variate analyses of unemployment explanations (Gaskell and Smith, 1985), such independent variables account for only a fraction of the variance in these beliefs. Several specific findings do, however, warrant further comment.

A growing criticism of unemployment research is its neglect of women (see Kelvin and Jarrett, 1985: 1; Marshall, 1984). One might expect that gender role socialization, coupled with different school and early work experiences, would lead young men and women to develop divergent views about the causes of unemployment, among other things. However, the absence of substantial gender effects in the regression analyses suggest that contextual factors related to socio-economic status, work and education overshadow gender influences on perceptions of the unemployment problem. This is not to ignore the preference expressed by our female respondents for structural as opposed to individualistic explanations, their disagreement with the view that immigrants or women take jobs from youth and, indeed, their generally greater concern about unemployment. Although previous comparable data are scant, research by Feather and O'Brien (1985) lead us to conclude that the weak gender effects we have observed are not unique to our sample. Further research could profitably examine how gender role socialization and gender differences in educational and labour market experiences may create divergent views about unemployment.

Considering that we utilized more comprehensive measures of social class than in previous studies, it is interesting that we did not detect stronger class effects. As expected, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds tended to lay blame for youth unemployment on business and government. Family vulnerability to unemployment, itself linked to class position, had little bearing on the type of explanation respondents held. However, students who had personally encountered unemployment fit the common attributional pattern, identified by other researchers, of being more structural than individualistic in causal beliefs (see Gurney, 1981; Feather and O'Brien, 1985; Gaskell and Smith, 1985). Yet, surprisingly, part-time and summer work experiences had a minimal impact on variations in individualistic and structural explanations. Perhaps students have a very immediate orientation to their pre-graduation

employment, viewing it as a way of obtaining spending money and of financing their education, rather than as a stepping stone for a future occupational role.

In general, our evidence suggests that high school and university graduates differ significantly in their support for 5 of the 6 explanations (Table 3). This may reflect the effects of education itself, but might also indicate an "age effect". Older respondents may be less quick to agree to a variety of statements about the causes of unemployment. Other educational factors produced less consistent results. More specifically, having a highly educated father seems to foster liberal views, to the extent that it was associated with a tendency to reject explanations based on work values or immigrants and women taking jobs. Yet as multiple regression analysis revealed, those with higher grades were less likely to agree with the business/government job creation and immigrants or women taking jobs explanations, but more supportive of the work values explanation. In other words, those young people who have succeeded in school through their own efforts may be projecting a meritocratic view onto the job market.

The rather disappointing regression results may, of course, be due to measurement problems. As in so much survey research, more extensive and accurate measures of individual's social attitudes and behaviours can lead to stronger empirical results. Recognizing that future studies might improve on our measures, we would argue, however, that our indicators of class, educational and labour market variables are, in themselves, adequate. But the conclusion that public beliefs about the causes of unemployment are widely distributed, and not restricted to identifiable sub-groups, requires more careful consideration. Such an explanation would have to consider the role of the mass media in shaping public opinion. In addition, further conceptual and empirical refinement of measures of causal attributions about unemployment may be necessary. The "explanation" items in our study were drawn from existing literature or derived a priori. The complexity of the unemployment problem -- especially its entanglement with major forces of industrial change linked to the recent recession, the new global division of labour, automation, and the sagging burden of government debt -- perhaps demands a fresh approach. There may in fact be a serious disjuncture between the social scientist's conception of the causes of umemployment, and the manner in which youth or other groups in society actually experience it. Reconceptualizing unemployment thus becomes an important research goal, perhaps best achieved by a more qualitative, 'grounded' approach to theory building.

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